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# Third space strategists: International students negotiating the transition from pathway program to postgraduate coursework degree

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*Pathway programs exist to prepare students for progression into university degrees but the transition experience for many students may not be as smooth as is suggested by the notion of the pathway. While attending a pathway program and at the beginning of their university degree, students may be in a third space, a liminal space where they engage in a complex process of becoming. They are required to negotiate a world shaped by different, and often conflicting discourses. In this productive space, identities can be explored and interrogated providing the potential for cultural adaptation and exchange. Using the “third space” to understand the student experience of transition, this paper examines interview responses from a group of postgraduate coursework international students as they complete a pathway program and begin to study in a degree program. Participants are found to be third space strategists as they translate their previous ways of learning, collaborate with other students, and reflect on their English language development. In some ways, these students demonstrate a better understanding of the cultural process of adjustment than the institution in which they study. These insights from students can inform curriculum design both in pathway and disciplinary contexts leading to the development of more relevant orientation and teaching programs.*

*Keywords: university preparation programs; pathway programs; Identity; Transition; International students*

## INTRODUCTION

Many international students enter Australian higher education by first being directed to or voluntarily undertaking a preparatory program in a pathway college. This arrangement suits universities as they can provide applicants who do not meet their criteria for admission with an alternative entry pathway. Often, incentives are offered to students, such as direct entry to programs of study, without the need for additional English language testing. However, while there is usually some monitoring of pathway institutions by the universities they are connected to, there has been limited research into the experiences of graduates from pathway programs. Research on international student experience has tended to focus on their difference from a perceived norm, obscuring the complexity of issues around their adaptation to study in Australian higher education. This limits our understanding of how to build reciprocity with students and improve our ability to provide quality transition experiences that enable them to achieve their goals for international study.

Questions remain around issues of student adaptation and adjustment to an unfamiliar higher education culture. How do they see themselves as individuals and as part of the collective: international students? To what extent are they able to exercise agency as they adapt to a different higher education context? To what extent are they limited by negative discourses that exist? This paper examines these questions, viewing pathway program graduates through the lens of the third space (Bhabha, 2004). After a review of the relevant literature, I examine the experiences of a group of students who transition to a postgraduate coursework degree to ascertain to what extent their transition can be considered to be taking place in a third space. I conclude that international students are variously able to adapt to and influence the institutional discourses they encounter as they make sense of their transition to the higher education context.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Perceptions of international students**

Studies of student experiences of higher education tend to characterize international students as a group different from local students and staff. Their learning backgrounds are often assumed to be different and they are expected to struggle (Sawir, 2005). Students are sometimes assumed to be in Australia solely for the immigration potential offered by university courses, and to lack interest in developing English language skills (Birrell, 2006). In classrooms, they are assumed to be passive and unwilling to contribute to discussions (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Tange & Jensen, 2012; Yates & Nguyen, 2012). Institutional discourses often frame international students in terms of their financial benefit to the institution or their contribution to skills shortages in the wider society (Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo, 2009). These perceptions of international students tend to construct them as a homogenous group, positioning them as lacking in a range of requirements for higher education. International students studying in a new cultural environment must negotiate these different discourses, which both produce and constrain their interactions. These “frameworks of meaning” (Pennycook, 2010, p. 112) construct roles and relationships for individuals and, on a broader scale, shape interactions within the university.

More nuanced understandings exist of international students as subjects who have agency and possess a level of control over their lives in the institution (Anderson, 2013; Madge et al., 2009). The experiences of international students as they transition to university often focus on student identity (English, 2005; Rizvi, 2000; Singh & Doherty, 2008). Implicit in these approaches is the assumption that, through daily interactions, individuals develop their culture and that culture is not something already formed that they carry with them. This process of cultural becoming for international students has been described as requiring engagement with “multiple literacies and discourses” (Lawrence, 2005, p. 243), and could be more fully documented by examining how particular cohorts handle the various transitions required as they study in the Australian higher education context.

### **Pathway programs**

Pathway programs offered to international students introduce the practices and protocols of higher education disciplines and aim to contribute to students’ success in higher education in a new cultural context. However, the generic nature of pathway programs suggests that they may provide only a limited idea of what it is like to study in higher

education. According to Harper, Prentice, and Wilson (2011), pathway programs may “promise” rather than “enable” success. A focus on English language in these programs is a starting point rather than an ideal preparation for further development of language within the disciplinary context. The differences between the two learning spaces—pathway and degree program—suggest that transition between them, for many students, may not be completely free of obstacles. This is not least because students are transitioning between quite different institutions. Pathway providers of English language are situated in the ELICOS (English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students) sector, which is focused on developing students’ English language and academic skills. In the university, there is an emphasis on disciplinary knowledge, often accompanied by an expectation that students will already possess the linguistic and academic skills required for success. There are also differences in the modes of delivery in each of these institutional locations (Benzie, 2011).

### **TRANSITIONS TO HIGHER EDUCATION**

Studies of transitions to higher education have tended to group different cohorts as one without referring to the finer detail of how, for different individuals, experiences may vary within a group. Studies are focused on groups such as “international” students and local students (Prescott & Hellsten, 2005), or problematize students rather than the institution (Sawir, 2005). The literature of transition also tends to focus on undergraduates as those requiring the most assistance through the transition to university (Kift, Nelson, & Clarke, 2010). The specific transition experiences of postgraduate students who are commencing higher education in a new country may share aspects in common with undergraduates. However, because these, often more mature students, are adjusting to a new learning culture and, often, a new discipline, they may have different issues to deal with. Additionally, there is growing realization that adaptation to the new culture does not necessarily take place at one time but may be a process of more or less continual transition throughout the course of study (Ecclestone, Biesta, & Hughes, 2010).

### **THIRD SPACE AND IDENTITY**

The notion of third space has been used to understand “sociality as interstitiality” (Gilbert, 2001, p. 101), considering social life as operating in a hybrid context. Applying this to international students sees them as in an in-between space, having completed study in their home countries and not yet fully inducted into an Australian higher education institution.

Bhabha’s (1990, 2004) spatial theories of third level “lived” or heavily acculturated experiential space derive from Lefebvre’s (1991) and Soja’s (1996) work on the spatial imagination. His focus on intercultural interaction can be used to explore cultural difference in many different settings. Bhabha’s notion of the hybridity of the collective within the third space helps to explain how those in an intercultural space negotiate, what are often contradictory demands of their lives (Khan, 1998, p. 464). Considering interactions as taking place in a third space provides a way of dealing with the homogenizing tendency of an us-versus-them approach which shuts down the potential for individual agency.

Bhabha's ideas of third space have been employed in a range of intercultural situations, but most often with immigrants (Khan, 1998) or international workers (English, 2005). In education, third space has been deployed as a means of understanding the cultural space that learners inhabit, both in the language education classroom and, more generally, in higher education (Bretag, 2006; Kramsch, 1999, 2006; Leask, 2004; Liddicoat, Crozet, & LoBianco, 1999). Different interpretations of this cultural third space exist. For example Moje et al. (2004) are interested in how teachers can create a third space in their classrooms which leaves the way open for change, suggesting that it is possible to create a third space as a desirable environment for learning. Kramsch (1999) however, argues instead that an abstract third space already exists in intercultural interactions. She considers that "the intrinsic contradictions of meaning and identity in discourse are precisely what might constitute the in-between space that we call inter- or cross-cultural" (Kramsch, 1999, p. 48). These discussions of the third space as a contradictory and ambivalent space can be enriched by further examining the experiences of particular cohorts of students as they engage with transitions in higher education.

## **METHOD**

This study aims to gain insights into the experiences of a group of international students who are negotiating a transitional third space. It reports on data generated in a larger study of the transition experiences of a group of 11 international students as they entered an Australian university. The sample consists of all students from one cohort who succeeded in a preparatory program at a pathway college (the pathway program) and entered the postgraduate coursework degree in commerce (the degree program). The group composition was typical of most intakes, with a predominance of students from China. Details of participants, including their study background and country of origin, are provided in Table 1.

Individual interviews were selected as the best means of understanding each participant's experience because they allowed a glimpse of the participant's own perspective (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Participants were interviewed on two occasions: first, as they completed studying English language and academic skills in the pathway program; and, second, 6 to 10 weeks later after they had been studying in the degree program for 5 weeks. This focus on a period when there was most change for students aimed to capture raw experiences of transition as they were taking place. Interviews were intended to take account of cultural difference within commencing students' experiences of transition into higher education and were conducted with an awareness of the need to counter deficit approaches that contribute to the othering of the international student (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000).

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed, drawing on Bhabha's (2004) concept of third space, to examine to what extent participants demonstrate strategies of resistance, especially to the more negative discourses circulating within—and about—their transitions from studying in their home countries, via a pathway college to Australian higher education. English (2005) uses the term "third space practitioners" to describe the participants in a study of women working as educators in "developing" countries. She highlights the political strategies these women used to subvert the stereotypes through which they were perceived. In a similar vein but using "strategist" rather than practitioner to indicate a more partial role, I propose that some participants in this study are able to resist the "otherness" implicit in those subject positions to which international students

are often relegated by academic discourses. The analysis is concerned with the third space as an abstract, intercultural space where interactions take place between staff and students, and between students and students. Interactions within the wider community are also included in this space. It is a political space, described by Bhabha (2004, p. 56) as infused with power relations, and it is this “in-between space . . . that carries the burden of the meaning of culture”. It is a space in which students negotiate their identities (Kenway & Bullen, 2003) as they adjust to a new cultural experience: studying in higher education.

**Table 1. Participants’ country of origin, education background and work experience**

Pseudonym	Country of origin	Previous study	Previous employment
Donna	China	Bachelor degree	-
Vijay	India	Masters degree (Accounting)	Lecturer Education agent
Pearl	China	Bachelor degree (Law)	-
Kanan	India	Bachelor degree (Commerce) (in English)	-
Beryl	China	Bachelor degree (Civil and Commercial Law)	Law
Skye	China	Bachelor degree (Public Administration)	?
Judy	China	Bachelor degree (Journalism) (In English) Travel guide	Travel guide
Clark	China	Bachelor degree (Engineering management)	Building company Pub in Ireland
Chris	China	Bachelor degree (Management) (in English)	Building company
Faith	China	No Bachelor degree	Accountant
Kazuo	Japan	Bachelor degree (Accounting)	Accountant

Contradictions in the thoughts and experiences of research participants may reveal the extent to which they claim third space identities in the context of the academic experience. Some individuals may see advantage in accommodating the identities available to them—at least to the extent that they are able. This choice can be explained as students being willing to go along with the limited identity positions the institution defines for them (Doherty & Singh, 2007, p. 129).

## RESULTS

Analysis of interviews reveals a range of ways in which participants demonstrate their capacities as third space strategists as they begin to experience the Australian academic environment. There is heterogeneity within the participant group, as they show “pragmatism, resistance, ambivalence, reinvention, affirmation, and solidarity” (Kenway & Bullen, 2003, p. 10). The analysis reveals the participants to be translating and rethinking their principles (Bhabha 1990, p. 216). They also demonstrate “affective solidarity” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 329)—a kind of mutual support—as they seek to make sense of their lives among and between instances of difference. These third space strategies provide a framework for the following discussion.

### **Translating, rethinking, and extending their principles**

One way in which participants “enact their hybridity” (English, 2005, p. 87) during the transition to a new academic culture is by showing awareness of changes in the way they are thinking or acting since beginning to study in Australia. This act of translating their principles to match the new context, rethinking and extending their previous ways of acting or interacting, is most obvious in the reports from two of the study participants, Donna and Vijay. In different ways, they show how they are attempting to translate their previous experiences of learning to accommodate the current learning context.

#### ***Becoming more engaged***

By the time of the second interview, Donna is already making use of her experiences to rethink her original, more pragmatic, reasons for studying in Australia. She says:

Um before I study I just want to mm get a degree but now I, I want to study, study hard because I found this really important and really useful . . . and before I study the class I er I didn't want to become a—accountant or work some at accounting, but now I . . . want to work some . . . at accounting. (Donna interview 2).

Unlike most other participants, Donna does not have a background in accounting and is apparently using the degree program pragmatically, as a path to gaining permanent residence in Australia. Reflecting that, against expectations, she is interested in the course, she explains how she would now like to work as an accountant in Australia, and so commits herself to the task ahead. She displays hybridity, which Bhabha emphasizes “is precisely about the fact that when a new situation, a new alliance formulates itself, it may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them” (Bhabha, 1990, p. 216). Donna, perhaps because she has realized that the goal, “get a degree”, also requires hard work, extends her original goal and blends it with a new one, “become [an] accountant”, thus creating a new understanding of her place as an international student.

#### ***Freedom constrained***

In the second interview, Vijay also indicates that he has had to rethink the way he interacts in the classroom. Despite feeling intimidated by a larger class than in the pathway program, he still asks questions of the lecturer, but he says: “it is not too free”.

Vijay	Er, really I'd say something ah like fear . . . of Australia, I don't know
Int.	because of the unknown things?
Vijay	Yeah Because of the unknown thing with my classes, I've got to go there yeah that's a different feeling than my previous journey years ago . . . the class each one is different in Australia, a huge class . . . and, yeah, sometimes you know in [pathway course] I've been free ready to ask any question lecturer. I do here, but it's not too free here, yeah, sometimes lecturers say, “Oh, I'll do a later”, so—
Int.	Oh, so they deflect your questions?
Vijay	Yeah, “Oh, I'll do that later”. OK sir [laugh]

(Vijay interview 2).

Vijay has found that the approach to learning differs from his expectations, but does not yet appear to have made the kinds of changes that Donna is implementing. In the past, for

him, being a student involved predictable activities such as receiving information, asking questions and processing the answers. This approach may have succeeded in the pathway program, where his experiences of study in Accounting and English, and employment as a lecturer and education agent, would all have enabled him to contribute confidently to class discussions. He finds the degree program somewhat different. There are many unknowns, and his freedom to ask questions has been curtailed. His mention of *fear* in the first line of the extract above suggests that he asks questions of the lecturer with more trepidation than in the past. However, it is not so much that he feels unable to ask the questions in a bigger group, “a huge class”, as that the lecturer refuses to answer the question, deferring the answer to another time.

Vijay has, it seems, contravened one of the cultural rules that define what is acceptable in the degree program. Only certain types of questions—those which are about the current topic, or those immediately relevant to all students—are acceptable in a large class, so the lecturer defers an answer to Vijay’s question. The question may have contravened an “implicit rule” about what is relevant, normal, and valued, and who has the right to engage a particular strand of discourse (Donald, 1992, p. 46). It is also possible that Vijay’s question anticipates material that will be covered later in the course. Having already gained a Master’s degree in Commerce from India, he may be more familiar with the course content than other students in the class. This is also supported in Vijay’s initial outburst in the second interview when he vehemently protests that knowledge is not being taught in the course:

- |       |  |
|-------|--|
| Vijay | it’s really not because I, I feel lost too much here in the uni that, that really don’t give you the knowledge of the subject. They want to just finish the, your postgraduations. |
| Int.  | What do they want to do, sorry?  |
| Vijay | They just want to finish your Master degree. They don’t want to give you a proper knowledge I think  |

It appears that he has not yet understood the approach to study that is expected. His protest that “they don’t really give you the knowledge of the subject” signals his expectation that the course be taught in ways more aligned with his experience. He has yet to make the kinds of adjustment expected of an international student. He expects to be explicitly taught content knowledge while the information in seminars seems limited to processes.

These extracts show how two different individuals bring to the third space of transition assumptions and approaches acquired in earlier learning situations. At this early stage of their postgraduate study, each negotiates the academic culture with a different level of acceptance. Donna seems willing to readjust her ways of thinking but Vijay, whose background suggests he may have more to lose, is holding on to his preconceived notion of what it is like to be a student in Australian higher education.

### **Demonstrating “affiliative solidarity”**

Bhabha’s notion of affiliative solidarity is relevant to the transition experience of the participants in this study. That is, they appear to gain some reassurance and agency in a sense of group solidarity, formed through the relationships they developed with each other during the pathway program and transition to the degree program. Bhabha (2004) describes affiliative solidarity as:

formed through the ambivalent articulations of the realm of the aesthetic, the fantasmatic, the economic and the body political: a temporality of social construction and contradiction that is iterative and interstitial. (p. 329)

It is, in other words, a form of social solidarity that emerges from the contradictions and ambivalence encountered in an intercultural space. Because any collective is always already hybrid, the social cannot be disconnected from the individual. This points towards understanding the social as not limited by the image of individuality, and the idea that difference, singularity, and community are not incompatible (Gilbert, 2001). The sense of community however, is not static or harmonious but continually requires change and adaptation.

In relation to the notion that experiences re-articulate within a third space of transition, some of the participants in this study are indeed noticing differences in the way their lives as students are unfolding. In China, participants studied to pass the exams that provided a gateway to studies overseas. Now things seem altogether different. Pearl compares this difference as a move from the hard work of preparing for exams in China to a more liberal environment in Australia. In the first interview she reflects:

I don't know too much but I think in Australia students is free—they have more free time I think so. In China we study from nine o'clock maybe eight o'clock eight a.m. until six eh at night the students is very tired and they have a lot of class to do. (Pearl interview 1).

In contrast to the pressures experienced at home, most participants, like Pearl, found that being a student, both in the pathway program and the disciplinary program, was more relaxing and more social. The students are, perhaps, at least in their life as students, becoming part of a community engaged in learning together. This contrasts with their previous experiences of studying long hours, in isolation, to pass exams. The following extracts demonstrate in different ways how the student participants perceive their experiences outside the classroom.

### *Commitment to friends*

Kanan demonstrates affiliative solidarity through understanding the interconnectedness of herself with others and including them in her world. After mentioning how much more confident she feels since studying in Australia, she says:

I think I should be in my class because I feel if I will not go to cl— class I will miss something . . . so I want to go there; also for study purpose that I will support other person . . . I don't know why. (Kanan interview 2).

In stressing the importance of interacting with, and supporting fellow students, she indicates her reflexivity, demonstrating that she has the ability to reflect beyond her own immediate context. Kanan's inclusive approach indicates she may be, in many ways, well prepared to study in the new context and may adjust easily to learning in Australian higher education. Faith demonstrates a different awareness of herself in relation to the other participants as she reflects on the month she spent in the pathway program, comparing her language level with others in the program: “[they] have some problem with English speaking”, indicating a perception of herself as more advanced in English language development. Instead of English language development, for her the pathway program provided: “a basic understanding of the Australian educational structure . . . it give you some time to adjust yourself” (interview 2). These reflexive statements indicate an



awareness and maturity, which contradict notions of international students as isolated and marginalized. Montgomery and McDowell's (2009) more recent research also refers to this sense of solidarity experienced by international groups, indicating the existence of a supportive student community.

### ***Study in the library as a "safe house"***

In the second interview, some participants discuss the enjoyment they find through studying in the library where they discuss the course tasks with their friends, often in Mandarin, their common home language. When asked to relate something positive from the experience of beginning to study in the degree program, Beryl replies:

Yeah, so um, ah, I think it's good to, um, study with other students, that's good experience we can do and the group discussion and, ah, um, um, do the work together we talk about the questions and we learn from each other. That's a good experience. (Beryl interview 2).

Skye also finds this practice motivating:

if I have a homework I can do at home sometimes I can do at home but eh when I read some textbook eh—I'm just when I read at home it's not very eh quick and I'm lazy so I need eh go to university for the people to library to study. (Skye interview 2).

Donna too finds this collaboration a more efficient way to study:

Oh, my first assignment um um most of time I need my classmate's help . . . all of the afternoon, yesterday afternoon, and the day before um we also um maybe three or four people, they're here and discuss about assignment, yeah, discuss. Oh not, not copy just discuss . . . yes, and er make sure everything . . . I always discuss . . . and er find some solutions . . . in school, in uni, and er do my homework in my place . . . it's a save time . . . more save time than . . . I just um find a solution by myself [laugh]. (Donna interview 2).

Donna's use of "not copy", possibly to reassure the interviewer that in discussing the assignment students are not colluding, shows her compliance with the dominant discourse around academic integrity. She indicates her awareness of the rules stipulating penalties for working too closely with other students.

Clark, unlike those who study in the library, prefers to study at home away from distractions: "No, er I been here er a couple of times but I don't like—you know, I like a very quiet place . . . my home is very quiet, nobody make noise" (Clark interview 2). However, at the same time, he appreciates having the opportunity to discuss tasks with classmates, and finds it is still possible through telephone contact: "if you don't understand something, you can ask classmate . . . that's a good thing but er at home ah we can still do that . . . on phone" (Clark interview 2). This formation of a social grouping provides some degree of "insulation" against the "English only" environment in the university, enabling a form of affiliative solidarity.

In negotiating the differences they encounter and the ambivalence in their lives as international students, participants employ home language social contact with peers. In coming together in the library to discuss their course work, students are continuing a practice developed in the classroom at the pathway college where they agreed that the emphasis on group work was one of the most profound differences between their previous experience of study in their home countries and that of the pathway program.

Canagarajah (2004) refers to such encounters as “safe houses”: physical spaces which allow students to be free from the surveillance of the teacher or the institution. He says these spaces are generally outside the classroom, in locations such as the canteen or the library. These extracts indicate that a safe house for some participants can be found in the library where they use their own language to discuss the tasks. Others who choose not to take part in these conversations in the library and study at home may, like Clark, have made use of the telephone contact network developed by participants during the pathway program to maintain that sense of solidarity.

### ***Fear of strangers***

Judy however, may not yet have been able to access affiliative solidarity. At the time of the second interview, she seems to be feeling quite isolated, a marked difference compared to the more hopeful interactions with Australians reported in the first interview when she mentioned having an Australian boyfriend and having a part-time job as a carer. In the second interview, after suggesting that the university should provide more opportunities for students to mix socially, she continues:

Yah because we have been adult we have our own friends, we, if we have something, if we have some experience or something like that we can communicate with our friends but not a stranger . . . so I have been here eight weeks but in our class maybe I have no close friends in our class just . . . study and go home and come here, yah. (Judy interview 2).

Judy indicates that she cannot strike up conversations with strangers. She is the only participant who uses the word “strangers”, but Beryl is also hesitant about approaching local students when she considers that they would not want to live with her: “I think first I should improve my English then when I speaking fluent then I think maybe I can get a chance to live with them yeah “ (Beryl interview 1).

Pearl also indicates hesitancy about forming new friendships when she relates her experiences at orientation: “I joined er orientation in the first time and I met some new friend but but ah I’m not this kind of people to like ah talking with another people so I just stayed with my old friend” (Pearl interview 2).

These indications, from some of the young Chinese women participants, of reticence to interact with people they do not already know may not be so unusual in young female students. Fear of crime studies indicate that international students who perceive themselves as outsiders are more likely to experience this kind of fear and that it can be alleviated by better integration into the community (Xiong & Smyrniotis, 2013). Kanan, the only non-Chinese female in the group, sees that making new connections and developing friendship networks is one of the best aspects of her studies. This indicates that she may not be feeling the same isolation Judy, Pearl and Beryl seem to be experiencing. However, unlike the Chinese women, Kanan has relatives living in Australia, and may have wider support networks beyond fellow students, enabling her to avoid the isolation her peers are experiencing.

This evidence of a sense of solidarity being available to some participants, despite the marginalization assigned by their status as international students, suggests they are able to transcend the stereotype of the isolated, struggling student. These examples show how some participants are gaining strength and actively creating opportunities to develop a sense of community, an “insurgent intersubjectivity” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 329), both within and outside the university setting. Clark and those who discuss their course tasks in the

library are beginning to develop a student sense of community. Montgomery and McDowell (2009) suggest that this positive support from friends and co-nationals can sustain and encourage international students. At the same time however, this group solidarity is not accessible by some participants in this study who appear to be, at this stage of their transition to the degree program, restrained by the discourses that position them as passive and reserved.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The analysis of these interview extracts where students relate their experiences reveal their complex positioning in a liminal space of transition. They are under some pressure to adapt to Australian higher education and they do this in different ways. It has been shown that students do cope with the task, but in a variety of ways. At times they take issue with the academic discourses that shape their lives, showing their reluctance to passively accept the new and different academic practices they encounter. At other times they approach the inevitable challenges with the attitude that they are not insurmountable. The transition to the degree program can be seen as a process of becoming, where students are both acted upon by relations of power in each institution, and, at the same time, capable of subverting that power to begin to claim agency. These international students do not always fit the stereotype of the passive, isolated student set against the superiority of a western education (Montgomery & McDowell, 2009). However, the contradictions apparent within each participant's "cultural world" mean that this process of accommodation is a complex and, in some ways, unattainable achievement. Perhaps what is most clear is the degree to which this achievement appears better understood by the participants than by the institution within which they are performing this cultural work.

This discussion has provided some evidence that the contribution brought by international students to the university is easily obscured in the tendency to label them in simplistic ways. All too often, students' practices are delegitimized and students marginalized while their prior professional experience is ignored (Tran 2010). While this discussion has not specifically focused on how international students are viewed from the perspective of the institution, the interview extracts suggest that the responsibility for success in English language development lies mostly with students, and that there is little appreciation of the knowledge and skills that they contribute, which leaves them to make a one-way adjustment to the academic context.

Despite the ongoing awareness of the need to promote inclusivity of international students in higher education, there has been slow progress (Clifford, 2010; Harman, 2005). The potential for student agency and the complex identity positions shown by this group of postgraduate students suggest that organizational change may be enhanced by continuing to move away from views of international students as a homogenous group and acknowledging their strategic approaches to studying in a new context.

Although some participants were able to rethink and extend their principles, others did not seem to demonstrate such flexibility. While these adaptations may be an inevitable requirement given the physical separation of the pathway and degree programs, more emphasis on disciplinary language and ways of learning could be included in the pathway curriculum. Pathway programs can be more relevant to the future study experiences of students if they are able to engage more fully with content in disciplinary programs (Benzie, 2011). While the collaboration between programs required for these stronger

links may be difficult to achieve due to the different disciplinary discourses at each location, the continuity would benefit students and result in a more appropriate Pathway curriculum.

Ways in which this change could be implemented from the disciplinary perspective include developing curriculum to fit the needs of students from a wider range of backgrounds. For instance, once students left the shelter of the pathway program, the task of continuing English language development was left entirely to these students—a realization not lost on Kazuo—but perhaps yet to be realized by others in the group. More overt inclusion of how language is used in the disciplinary context may be one way of changing the curriculum to better suit the needs of international students.

Focusing on one university, this study cannot allow generalization to other contexts. However, it provides a single case study which can be incorporated into further research on a wider range of pathway colleges or universities. Another limitation in the study is that it has attempted to capture only one short stage, a snapshot of the participants' transition experiences. Taken over a longer period, participants' reactions may have shown a different trajectory. Further longitudinal research could provide deeper insight into participants' lives and, perhaps, indicate more interest and involvement in their experiences on the part of the institution.

## **CONCLUSION**

The existence of pathway programs intended to prepare international students for their experience of higher education can lead to the assumption that students will move seamlessly from one institution to another. While experience in a pathway program does prepare students for the higher education context, both through language development and an introduction to the academic culture, an even greater benefit may be gained by the connections made with a group of peers. These social connections endure beyond the pathway context and set students up for learning interactions in the degree context. Replacing a focus on difference with the more complex version of identity negotiation encompassed in the notion of a third space can enable more productive ways of imagining international students: as making sense of the complex transition experience and bringing a range of resources to the process.

This paper has shown how the lens of the third space of transition can highlight the experiences of international students as more complex and ambivalent than has been described in the literature. Viewing students from overseas as a homogenous group, as passive, and as automatically in deficit leaves less incentive for institutions to accept international students as valued members of the academic community who are strategic in their approaches to learning and living in a new culture. Not only is the opportunity for a quality learning experience denied for learners who have much to offer, but also their (non-monetary) contribution to Australian higher education tends to be ignored.

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